

Does Hinduism Teach That All Religions Are The Same?

by Dr. Frank Gaetano Morales

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A Philosophical Critique of Radical Universalism

It is by no means an exaggeration to say that the ancient religion of Hinduism has been one of the least understood religious traditions in the history of world religion. The sheer number of stereotypes, misconceptions and outright false notions about what Hinduism teaches, as well as about the precise practices and behavior that it asks of its followers, outnumber those of any other religion currently known. Leaving the more obviously grotesque crypto-colonialist caricatures of cow-worshipping, caste domination and sutee aside, even many of the most fundamental theological and philosophical foundations of Hinduism often remain inexplicable mysteries to the general public and supposed scholars of Hindu Studies. More disturbing, however, is the fact that many wild misconceptions about the beliefs of Hinduism are prevalent even among the bulk of purported followers of Hinduism and, alarmingly, even to many purportedly learned spiritual teachers, gurus and swamis who claim to lead the religion in present times.

Of the many current peculiar concepts mistakenly ascribed to Hindu theology, one of the most widely misunderstood is the idea that Hinduism somehow teaches that all religions are equal... that all religions

are the same, with the same purpose, goal, experientially tangible salvific state, and object of ultimate devotion. So often has this notion been thoughtlessly repeated by so many—from the common Hindu parent to the latest swamiji arriving on American shores yearning for a popular following that it has now become artificially transformed into a supposed foundation stone of modern Hindu teachings. Many Hindus are now completely convinced that this is actually what Hinduism teaches. Despite its widespread popular repetition, however, does Hinduism actually teach the idea that all religions are really the same? Even a cursory examination of the long history

of Hindu philosophical thought, as well as an objective analysis of the ultimate logical implications of such a proposition, quickly makes it quite apparent that traditional Hinduism has never supported such an idea.

The doctrine of what I call ‘Radical Universalism’ makes the claim that “all religions are the same.” This dogmatic assertion is of very recent origin, and has become one of the most harmful misconceptions in the Hindu world in the last 150 or so years. It is a doctrine that has directly led to a self-defeating philosophical relativism that has, in turn, weakened the stature and substance of Hinduism to its very core. The doctrine of Radical Universalism has made Hindu philosophy look infantile in the eyes of non-Hindus, has led to a collective state of self-revulsion, confusion and shame in the minds of too many Hindu youth, and has opened the Hindu community to be preyed upon much more easily by the zealous missionaries of other religions. The problem of Radical Universalism is arguably the most important issue facing the global Hindu community today. In the following paragraphs, we will perform an in-depth examination of the intrinsic fallacies contained in this inherently non-Hindu idea, as well as the untold damage that Radical Universalism has wrought in modern Hinduism.

What’s a Kid to Do?

Indian Hindu parents are to be given immense credit. The daily challenges that typical Hindu parents face in encouraging their children to maintain their commitment to Hinduism are enormous and very well-known. Hindu parents try their best to observe fidelity to the religion of their ancestors, often having little understanding of the religion themselves other than what was given to them, in turn, by their own parents. All too many Indian Hindu youth, on the other hand, find themselves unattracted to a religion that is little comprehended or respected by most of those around them - Hindu and non-Hindu alike. Today’s Hindu youth seek more strenuously convincing reasons for following a religion than merely the argument that it is the family tradition. Today’s Hindu youth demand, and deserve, cogent philosophical explanations about what Hinduism actually teaches, and why they should remain Hindu rather than join any of the many other religious alternatives they see around them. Temple priests are often ill equipped to give these bright Hindu youth the answers they so sincerely seek... mom and dad are usually even less knowledgeable than the temple pujaris. What is a Hindu child to do?

As I travel the nation delivering lectures on Hindu philosophy and spirituality, I frequently encounter a repeated scenario. Hindu parents will often approach me after I’ve finished my lecture and timidly ask if they can have some advice. The often-repeated story goes somewhat like this:

“We raised our son/daughter to be a good Hindu. We took them to the temple for important holidays. We even sent him/her to a Hindu camp for a weekend when they were 13. Now at the age of 23, our child has left Hinduism and converted to the (fill in the blank) religion. When we ask how could they have left the religion of their family, the answer that they throw back in our face is: ‘but mama/dada, you always taught us that all religions are the same, and that it doesn’t really matter how a person worships God. So what does it matter if we’ve followed your advice and switched to another religion?’”

Many of you currently reading this article have probably been similarly approached by parents expressing this same dilemma. The truly sad thing about this scenario is that the child is, of course, quite correct in her assertion that she is only following the logical conclusion of her parents' often-repeated mantra of "all religions are the same." If all religions are exactly the same, after all, and if we all just end up in the same place in the end anyway, then what does it really matter what religion we follow? Hindu parents complain when their children adopt other religions, but without understanding that it was precisely this highly flawed dogma of Radical Universalism, and not some inherent flaw of Hinduism itself, that has driven their children away. My contention is that parents themselves are not to be blamed for espousing this non-Hindu idea to their children. Rather, much of the blame is to be placed at the feet of today's ill equipped Hindu teachers and leaders, the supposed guardians of authentic Dharma teachings.

In modern Hinduism, we hear from a variety of sources this claim that all religions are equal. Unfortunately, the most damaging source of this fallacy is none other than the many un-informed spiritual leaders of the Hindu community itself. I have been to innumerable *pravachanas*, for example, where a benignly grinning guruji will provide his audience with the following tediously parroted metaphor, what I call the Mountain Metaphor.

The Mountain Metaphor:

"Truth (or God or Brahman) lies at the summit of a very high mountain. There are many diverse paths to reach the top of the mountain, and thus attain the one supreme goal. Some paths are shorter, some longer. The path itself, however, is unimportant. The only truly important thing is that seekers all reach the top of the mountain."

While this simplistic metaphor might seem compelling at a cursory glance, it leaves out a very important elemental supposition: it makes the unfounded assumption that everyone wants to get to the top of the same mountain! As we will soon see, not every religion shares the same goal, the same conception of the Absolute (indeed, even the belief that there is an Absolute), or the same means to their respective goals. Rather, there are many different philosophical 'mountains', each with their own very unique claim to be the supreme goal of all human spiritual striving. As I will show, Radical Universalism is not only an idea that is riddled with self-contradictory implications, but it is a doctrine that never originated from traditional Hinduism at all.

A Tradition of Tolerance, Not Capitulation

Historically, pre-colonial classical Hinduism never taught that all religions are the same. This is not to say, however, that Hinduism has not believed in tolerance or freedom of religious thought and expression. It has very clearly always been a religion that has taught tolerance of other valid religious traditions. However, the assertion that a) we should have tolerance for the beliefs of other religions is a radically different claim from the overreaching declaration that, b) all religions are the same. And this confusion between two thoroughly separate assertions may be one reason why so many modern Hindus believe that Hindu tolerance is synonymous with Radical Universalism. To maintain a healthy tolerance of another person's religion does not mean that we have to then adopt that person's religion!

Traditional Hinduism has always been the most tolerant, patient and welcoming of all religions. Hinduism is not a religion that persecutes others merely for having a difference in theological belief. Hindu India, for example, has been the sole nation on earth where the Jewish community was never persecuted. This is the case despite the presence of Jews in India for over 2000 years. Similarly, Zoroastrian refugees escaping the destruction of the Persian civilization at the hands of Islamic conquerors were greeted with welcome refuge in India over 1000 years ago. The Zoroastrian community (now known as the Parsee community) in India has thrived in all these many centuries, living together with their Hindu neighbors in peace and mutual respect. Hinduism has been a religion that has always sought to live side-by-side peacefully with the followers of other, non-Hindu, religions, whether they were the indigenous Indian religions of Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism or the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam.

In keeping with the Vedic adage that the guest in one's home is to be treated with as much hospitality as one would treat a visiting divinity, Hinduism has always been gracious to the followers of non-Hindu religions, and respectful of the gods, scriptures and customs of others. The tolerance and openness of Hinduism has been historically unprecedented among the wider community of world religions, universally acclaimed, and very well attested.

The common mistake that is often made, however, is to mistake the long-held Hindu tradition of tolerating other religions with the mistaken notion that Hinduism consequently encourages us to believe that all religions are exactly the same. We have mistaken Hindu tolerance with Radical Universalism. The leap from tolerance of other faiths to a belief that all religions are equal is not a leap that is grounded in logic. Nor is it grounded in the history, literature or philosophy of the Hindu tradition itself.

Uniquely Hindu: The Crisis of the Hindu Lack of Self-Worth

In general, many of the world's religions have been periodically guilty of fomenting rigid sectarianism and intolerance among their followers. We have witnessed, especially in the record of the more historically recent Western religions, that religion has sometimes been used as a destructive mechanism misused to divide people, to conquer others in the name of one's god, and to make artificial and oppressive distinctions between 'believers' and 'non-believers'. Being an inherently non-fundamentalist world-view, Hinduism has naturally always been keen to distinguish its own tolerant approach to spirituality vis-à-vis more sectarian and conflict oriented notions of religion. Modern Hindus are infamous for bending over backwards to show the world just how non-fanatical and open-minded we are, even to the point of denying ourselves the very right to unapologetically celebrate our own Hindu tradition.

Unfortunately, in our headlong rush to devolve Hinduism of anything that might seem to even remotely resemble the closed-minded sectarianism sometimes found in other religions, we often forget the obvious truth that Hinduism is itself a systematic and self-contained religious tradition in its own right. In the same manner that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, or Jainism have their own unique and specific beliefs, doctrines and claims to spiritual authority, all of which fall within the firmly demarcated theological bounds of their own unique traditions, Hinduism too has just such Hindu-centric theological and institutional bounds. Like every other religion, Hinduism is a

distinct and unique tradition, with its own in-built beliefs, world-view, traditions, rituals, concept of the Absolute, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, cosmology, cosmogony, and theology. The grand, systematic philosophical construct that we call Hinduism today is the result of the extraordinary efforts and spiritual insights of the great rishis, yogis, acharyas and gurus of our religion, guided by the transcendent light of the Vedic revelation, that has stood the test of time. It is a tradition that is worthy of healthy celebration by Hindus and respectful admiration by non-Hindus.

Hindus have no more reason to be uncomfortable with the singular uniqueness of our own spiritual tradition, or less of a reason to boldly assert our own exceptional contributions to the development of global religious thought, than do the followers of any other venerable faith. This is an obvious, yet all too often forgotten fact, the importance of which cannot be overstated: Hinduism is its own uniquely independent religious tradition, different and distinct from any other religion on earth. There is a Hindu philosophy, a Hindu world-view, a Hindu set of ethics, a Hindu theology, a Hindu spiritual culture, a Hindu view on the nature of God (*Ishvara*), personhood (*jiva*) and material reality (*jagat*). In short, there is a distinctly Hindu tradition.

Such a recognition of Hinduism's unique features is not to deny that there will always be several important similarities between many of the religions of the world. Indeed, the human impetus to know Truth being a universally experienced phenomenon, it would be quite surprising indeed if there were not some common features discernable in all the diverse religions of our common earth. While interesting commonalities and similarities can always be seen and appreciated, however, it would be misleading to consequently deny that Hinduism, like every other separate religious tradition, is also to be plainly contrasted in myriad ways from any other religion. Such a realization and acceptance of Hinduism's unique place in the world does not, by any stretch of the imagination, have to lead automatically to sectarianism, strife, conflict or religious chauvinism. Indeed, such a recognition of Hinduism's distinctiveness is crucial if Hindus are to possess even a modicum of healthy self-understanding, self-respect and pride in their own tradition. Self-respect and the ability to celebrate one's unique spiritual tradition are basic psychological needs, and a cherished civil right of any human being, Hindu and non-Hindu alike.

Letting the Tradition Speak for Itself

When we look at the philosophical, literary and historical sources of the pre-colonial Hindu tradition, we find that the notion of Radical Universalism is overwhelmingly absent. The idea that 'all religions are the same' is not found in the sacred literature of Hinduism, among the utterances of the great philosopher-acharyas of Hinduism, or in any of Hinduism's six main schools of philosophical thought (the *Shad-darshanas*). Throughout the history of the tradition, such great Hindu philosophers as Vyasa, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Vijnana Bhikshu, Swami Narayana (Sahajananda Swami), and others made very unambiguous and unapologetic distinctions between the religion of Hinduism and non-Hindu religions. The sages of pre-modern Hinduism had no difficulty in boldly asserting what was, and what was not, to be considered Hindu. And they did so often! This lucid sense of religious community and philosophical clarity is seen first and foremost in the very question of what, precisely, constitutes a 'Hindu'. Without knowing the answer to this most foundational of questions, it is impossible to fully assess the damaging inadequacies of Radical Universalist dogma.

Who is a Hindu?

Remarkably, when the question of who is a Hindu is discussed today, we get a multitude of confused and contradictory answers from both Hindu laypersons and from Hindu leaders. That we have such a difficult time understanding the answer to even so fundamental a question as ‘who is a Hindu?’ is a starkly sad indicator of the lack of knowledge in the Hindu community today. Some of the more simplistic answers to this question include: Anyone born in India is automatically a Hindu (the ethnicity fallacy); if your parents are Hindu, then you are Hindu (the familial argument); if you are born into a certain caste, then you are Hindu (the genetic inheritance model); if you believe in reincarnation, then you are Hindu (forgetting that many non-Hindu religions share at least some of the beliefs of Hinduism); if you practice any religion originating from India, then you are a Hindu (the national origin fallacy). The real answer to this question has already been conclusively answered by the ancient sages of Hinduism, and is actually much simpler to ascertain than we would guess.

The two primary factors that distinguish the individual uniqueness of the great world religious traditions are:

- a) the scriptural authority upon which the tradition is based, and
- b) the fundamental religious tenet(s) that it espouses.

If we ask the question ‘what is a Jew?’ for example, the answer is: someone who accepts the Torah as their scriptural guide and believes in the monotheistic concept of God espoused in these scriptures. What is a Christian? A person who accepts the Gospels as their scriptural guide and believes that Jesus is the incarnate God who died for their sins. What is a Muslim? Someone who accepts the Qur'an as their scriptural guide, and believes that there is no God but Allah, and that Mohammed is his prophet. In general, what determines whether a person is a follower of any particular religion is whether or not they accept, and attempt to live by, the scriptural authority of that religion. This is no less true of Hinduism than it is of any other religion on earth. Thus, the question of what is a Hindu is similarly very easily answered. By definition, a Hindu is an individual who accepts as authoritative the religious guidance of the Vedic scriptures, and who strives to live in accordance with Dharma, God's divine laws as revealed in the Vedic scriptures. In keeping with this standard definition, all the Hindu thinkers of the six traditional schools of Hindu philosophy (*Shad-darshanas*) insisted on the acceptance of the scriptural authority (*shabda-pramana*) of the Vedas as the primary criterion for distinguishing a Hindu from a non-Hindu, as well as distinguishing overtly Hindu philosophical positions from non-Hindu ones. It has been the historically accepted standard that, if you accept the Vedas (meaning the complete shruti and smṛti canon of the Vedic scriptures, such as the four Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, etc.) as your scriptural authority, and lived your life in accordance with the Dharmic principles of the Vedas, you are then a Hindu. Thus, any Indian who rejects the authority of the Veda is obviously not a Hindu - regardless of their birth. While an American, Canadian, Russian, Brazilian, Indonesian or Indian who does accept the authority of the Veda obviously is a Hindu. One is Hindu, not by race, but by practice.

Clearly Defining Hinduism

Traditional Hindu philosophers continually emphasized the crucial importance of clearly understanding what was Hinduism proper and what were non-Hindu religious paths. You cannot claim to be a Hindu, after all, if you do not understand what it is that you claim to believe, and what it is that others believe. One set of antonymous Sanskrit terms repeatedly employed by many traditional Hindu philosophers were the words *vaidika* and *avaidika*. The word *vaidika* (or ‘Vedic’ in English) means one who accepts the teachings of the *Veda*. It refers specifically to the unique epistemological stance taken by the traditional schools of Hindu philosophy, known as *shabda-pramana*, or employing the divine sound current of *Veda* as a means of acquiring valid knowledge. In this sense the word ‘*vaidika*’ is employed to differentiate those schools of Indian philosophy that accept the epistemological validity of the *Veda* as *apaurusheya*, or a perfect authoritative spiritual source, eternal and untouched by the speculations of humanity, juxtaposed with the *avaidika* schools that do not ascribe such validity to the *Veda*. In pre-Christian times, *avaidika* schools were clearly identified by Hindu authors as being specifically Buddhism, Jainism and the atheistic Charvaka school, all of whom did not accept the *Veda*. These three schools were unanimously considered non-Vedic, and thus non-Hindu (they certainly are geographically Indian religions, but they are not theologically/ philosophically Hindu religions). Manu, one of the great ancient lawgivers of the Hindu tradition, states the following in his *Manava-dharma-shastra*:

*All those traditions and all those disreputable systems of philosophy that are not based on the *Veda* produce no positive result after death; for they are declared to be founded on darkness. All those doctrines differing from the *Veda* that spring up and soon perish are ineffectual and misleading, because they are of modern date. (Manu XII, 95)*

Stated in simpler terms, ‘*vaidika*’ specifically refers to those persons who accept the *Veda* as their sacred scripture, and thus as their source of valid knowledge about spiritual matters.

In his famous compendium of all the known Indian schools of philosophy, the *Sarva-darshana-samgraha*, Madhava Acharya (a 14th century Advaita philosopher) unambiguously states that Charvakins (atheist empiricists), ‘Buddhas’ (Buddhists) and ‘Arhatas’ (Jains) are among the non-Vedic, and thus non-Hindu, schools. Conversely, he lists Paniniya, Vaishnava, Shaiva and others among the Vedic, or Hindu, traditions. Likewise, in his *Prasthanabhedha*, the well-known Madhusudana Sarasvati (fl. 17th century C.E.) contrasts all the *mleccha* (or ‘barbaric’) viewpoints with Hindu views and says that the former are not even worthy of consideration, whereas the Buddhist views must at least be considered and debated. The differentiation between ‘orthodox’ and ‘heterodox’, from a classical Hindu perspective, rests upon acceptance of the Vedic revelation, with the latter rejecting the sanctity of the *Veda*. As a further attempt to clearly distinguish between Hindu and non-Hindu, Hindu philosophers regularly used the Sanskrit terms *astika* and *nastika*. The two terms are synonymous with *vaidika* and *avaidika*, respectively. *Astika* refers to those who believe in the *Vedas*, *nastika* to those who reject the *Vedas*. Under the *astika* category Hinduism would include any Hindu path that accepts the *Veda*, such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, Advaita, Yoga, Nyaya, Mimamsa, among others. The *nastika* religions would include any religious tradition that does not accept the *Veda*: Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam, Baha’i, etc. Thus when it came to the importance of unambiguously differentiating between the

teachings of Hinduism and the teachings of non-Hindu religions, the most historically important sages of Hindu philosophical and theological thought were clearly advocates of Vaidika Dharma - Hinduism—as a systematic, unitive tradition of spiritual expression.

Dharma Rakshaka: The Defenders of Dharma

With the stark exception of very recent times, Hinduism has historically always been recognized as a separate and distinct religious phenomenon, as a tradition unto itself. It was recognized as such by both outside observers of Hinduism, as well as from within, by Hinduism's greatest spiritual teachers. The saints and sages of Hinduism continuously strived to uphold the sanctity and gift of the Hindu world-view, often under the barrages of direct polemic opposition by non-Hindu traditions. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Charvakin (atheists), the four main philosophical schools found in Indian history, would frequently engage each other in painstakingly precise debates, arguing compellingly over even the smallest conceptual minutia of philosophical subject matter. The sages of Hinduism met such philosophical challenges with cogent argument, rigid logic and sustained pride in their tradition, usually soundly defeating their philosophical opponents in open debate. Shankara Acharya, as only one of many examples of Hindu acharyas defending their religion, earned the title 'Digvijaya', or 'Conqueror of all Directions'. This indomitable title was awarded Shankara due solely to his formidable ability to defend the Hindu tradition from the philosophical incursions of opposing (purva-paksha), non-Hindu schools of thought. Indeed, Shankara is universally attributed by both scholars, as well as later, post-Shankara Hindu leaders, with being partially responsible for the historical decline of Buddhism in India due to his intensely polemic missionary activities. No Radical Universalist was he! The great teacher Madhva is similarly seen as being responsible for the sharp decline of Jainism in South India due to his immense debating skills in defence of Vaidika Dharma. All pre-modern Hindu sages and philosophers recognized and celebrated the singularly unique vision that Hinduism had to offer the world, clearly distinguished between Hindu and non-Hindu religions, and defended Hinduism to the utmost of their formidable intellectual and spiritual abilities. They did so unapologetically, professionally and courageously. The Hindu world-view only makes sense, has value, and will survive if we all similarly celebrate Hinduism's uniqueness today.

Traditional Hinduism Versus Neo-Hinduism

A tragic occurrence in the very long history of Hinduism was witnessed throughout the 19th century, the destructive magnitude of which Hindu leaders and scholars today are only beginning to adequately assess and address. This development both altered and weakened Hinduism to such a tremendous degree that Hinduism has not yet even begun to recover. The classical, traditional Hinduism that had been responsible for the continuous development of thousands of years of sophisticated culture, architecture, music, philosophy, ritual and theology came under devastating assault during the 19th century British colonial rule like at no other time in India's history. For a thousand years previous to the British Raj, foreign marauders had repeatedly attempted to destroy Hinduism through overt physical genocide and the systematic destruction of Hindu temples and sacred places. Traditional Hinduism's wise sages and noble warriors had fought bravely to stem this anti-Hindu holocaust to the best of their ability, more often than not paying for their bravery with their lives. What the Hindu community experienced under British Christian

domination, however, was an ominously innovative form of cultural genocide. What they experienced was not an attempt at the physical annihilation of their culture, but a deceptively subtler program of intellectual and spiritual annihilation. It is easy for a people to understand the urgent threat posed by an enemy that seeks to literally kill them. It is much harder, though, to understand the threat of an enemy who, while remaining just as deadly, claims to seek only to serve a subjugated people's best interests.

During this short span of time in the 19th century, the ancient grandeur and beauty of a classical Hinduism that had stood the test of thousands of years came under direct ideological attack. What makes this period in Hindu history most especially tragic is that the main apparatus that the British used in their attempts to destroy traditional Hinduism were the British educated, spiritually co-opted sons and daughters of Hinduism itself. Seeing traditional Hinduism through the eyes of their British masters, a pandemic wave of 19th century Anglicized Hindu intellectuals saw it as their solemn duty to 'westernize' and 'modernize' traditional Hinduism to make it more palatable to their new European overlords. One of the phenomena that occurred during this historic period was the fabrication of a new movement known as 'neo-Hinduism'. Neo-Hinduism was an artificial religious construct used as a paradigmatic juxtaposition to the legitimate traditional Hinduism that had been the religion and culture of the people for thousands of years. Neo-Hinduism was used as an effective weapon to replace authentic Hinduism with a British invented version designed to make a subjugated people easier to manage and control.

The Christian and British inspired neo-Hinduism movement attempted to execute several overlapping goals, and did so with great success:

- a) The subtle Christianization of Hindu theology, which included concerted attacks on iconic imagery (*archana*, or *murti*), panentheism, and continued belief in the beloved gods and goddesses of traditional Hinduism.
- b) The imposition of the Western scientific method, rationalism and skepticism on the study of Hinduism in order to show Hinduism's supposedly inferior grasp of reality.
- c) Ongoing attacks against the ancient Hindu science of ritual in the name of simplification and democratization of worship.
- d) The importation of Radical Universalism from liberal, Unitarian/ Universalist Christianity as a device designed to severely water down traditional Hindu philosophy.

The dignity, strength and beauty of traditional Hinduism was recognized as the foremost threat to Christian European rule in India. The invention of neo-Hinduism was the response. Had this colonialist program been carried out with a British face, it would not have met with as much success as it did. Therefore, an Indian face was used to impose neo-Hinduism upon the Hindu people. The resultant effects of the activities of Indian neo-Hindus were ruinous for traditional Hinduism.

The primary dilemma with Hinduism as we find it today, in a nutshell, is precisely this problem of

- 1) not recognizing that there are really two distinct and conflicting Hinduisms today, Neo-Hindu and Traditionalist Hindu; and
- 2) with Traditionalists being the guardians of authentic Dharma philosophically and attitudinally, but not yet coming to full grips with the modern world...i.e., not yet having found a way of

negotiating authentic Hindu Dharma with an ability to interface with modernity and communicate this unadulterated Hindu Dharma in a way that the modern mind can most appreciate it.

Hinduism will continue to be a religion mired in confusion about its own true meaning and value until traditionalist Hindus can assertively, professionally and intelligently communicate the reality of genuine Hinduism to the world. Until it learns how to do this, neo-Hinduism will continue its destructive campaign.

The non-Hindu Origins of Radical Universalism

Radical Universalism is neither traditional nor classical in its origin. The origins of the distinctly non-Hindu idea of Radical Universalism, and the direct paralyzing impact it has had on modern Hindu philosophy, can only be traced back to the early 19th century. It is an idea not older than two centuries, yet the results of which have been devastating for both the progress of serious Hindu philosophical development since the 19th century, as well as in its practical effect of severely undermining Hindu self-esteem. Its intellectual roots are not even to be found in Hinduism itself, but rather are clearly traced back to Christian missionary attempts to alter the genuine teachings of authentic Hinduism. Radical Universalism was the vogue among 19th century British educated Indians, most of who had little authentic information about their own Hindu intellectual and spiritual heritage. These westernized Indians were often overly eager to gain acceptance and respectability for Indian culture from a Christian European audience who saw in Hinduism nothing more than the childish prattle of a brutish colonized people. Many exaggerated stereotypes about Hinduism had been unsettling impressionable European minds for a century previous to their era. Rather than attempting to refute these many stereotypes about Hinduism by presenting Hinduism in its authentic and pristine form, however, many of these 19th century Christianized Indians felt it was necessary to instead gut Hinduism of anything that might seem offensively exotic to the European mind. Radical Universalism seemed to be the perfect base-notion upon which to artificially construct a ‘new’ Hinduism that would give the Anglicized 19th century Indian intelligentsia the acceptability they so yearned to be granted by their British masters.

We encounter one of the first instances of the Radical Universalist infiltration of Hinduism in the syncretistic teachings of Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), the founder of the infamous *Brahmo Samaj*. A highly controversial figure during his life, Roy was a Bengali pseudo-intellectual who was heavily influenced by the teachings of the Unitarian Church, a heterodox denomination of Christianity. In addition to studying Christianity, Islam and Sanskrit, he studied Hebrew and Greek with the dream of translating the Bible into Bengali. A self-described Hindu ‘reformer’, he viewed Hinduism through a warped colonial Christian lens. The Christian missionaries had told Roy that traditional Hinduism was a barbaric religion that had led to oppression, superstition and ignorance of the Indian people. He believed them. More, Roy saw Biblical teachings, specifically, as holding the cherished key to altering traditional Hindu teachings to make it more acceptable to India’s colonial masters. In his missionary zeal to Christianize Hinduism, this Hindu ‘reformer’ even wrote an anti-Hindu tract known as *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*. It was directly from these Christian missionaries that Roy derived the bulk of his ideas, including the anti-Hindu idea of the radical equality of all religions.

In addition to acquiring Radical Universalism from the Christian missionaries, Roy also felt it necessary to Christianize Hinduism by adopting many Biblical theological beliefs into his new neo-Hindu 'reform' movement. Some of these other non-intrinsic adaptations included a rejection of Hindu panentheism, to be substituted with a more Biblical notion of anthropomorphic monotheism; a rejection of all iconic worship ('graven images' as the crypto-Christians of the Brahmo Samaj phrased it); and a repudiation of the doctrine of avatars, or the divine descent of God. Roy's immediate successors, Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen, attempted to incorporate even more Christian ideals into this new invention of neo-Hinduism. Sen even went so far as concocting a Brahmo Samaj text that contained passages from a variety of differing religious traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. In his later years, Sen portrayed himself as a divinized prophet of the 'New Dispensation', which he felt replaced the Old and New Testaments, in addition to traditional Hinduism. With Sen's continued descent into anti-Hindu apostasy and megalomania, the movement rapidly declined in importance and influence. The Brahmo Samaj is today extinct as an organization, but the global Hindu community is still feeling the damaging effects of its pernicious influence even at present.

The next two neo-Hindu Radical Universalists that we witness in the history of 19th century Hinduism are Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and Vivekananda (1863-1902). Though Vivekananda was a disciple (*shishya*) of Ramakrishna, the two led very different lives. Ramakrishna was born into a Hindu family in Dakshineshwar. In his adult life, he was a Hindu temple priest and a fervently demonstrative devotee of the Divine Mother. His primary object of worship was the goddess Kali, whom he worshipped with intense devotion all of his life. Despite his Hindu roots, however, many of Ramakrishna's ideas and practices were derived, not from the ancient wisdom of classical Hinduism, but from the non-Vedic religious outlooks of Islam and liberal Christianity. Though he saw himself as being primarily Hindu, Ramakrishna also resorted to worshipping in mosques and churches, and believed that all religions aimed at the same supreme destination. He experimented with Muslim, Christian and a wide variety of Hindu practices, blending, mixing and matching practices and beliefs as they appealed to him at any given moment. In 1875, Ramakrishna met Keshub Chandra Sen, the then leader of the neo-Hindu Brahmo Samaj, and formed a close working relationship with him. Sen introduced Ramakrishna to the close-knit community of neo-Hindu activists who lived in Calcutta, and would in turn often bring these activists to Ramakrishna's *satsanghas*.

Throughout his remarkable life, Ramakrishna remained illiterate, and wholly unfamiliar with both classical Hindu literature and philosophy, and the authentic teachings of the great acharyas who served as the guardians of those sacred teachings. Despite the severely obvious challenges that he experienced in understanding Hindu theology, playing upon the en vogue sentiment of religious universalism of his day, Ramakrishna ended up being one of the most widely popular of neo-Hindu Radical Universalists. The fame of Ramakrishna was to be soon eclipsed, however, by that of his most famous disciple.

Swami Vivekananda was arguably Ramakrishna's most capable disciple. An eloquent and charismatic speaker, Vivekananda will be forever honored by the Hindu community for his brilliant defense of Hinduism at the Parliament of World Religions in 1893. Likewise, Vivekananda contributed greatly to the revival of interest in the study of Hindu scriptures and philosophy in turn-of-the-century India. The positive contributions of Vivekananda toward Hinduism are numerous and great indeed. Notwithstanding his remarkable undertakings, however, Vivekananda found himself in a similarly difficult position as other neo-Hindu leaders of his day were. How to

make sense of the ancient ways of Hinduism, and hopefully preserve Hinduism, in the face of the overwhelming onslaught of modernity? Despite some positive contributions by Vivekananda and other neo-Hindus in attempting to formulate a Hindu response to the challenge of modernity, that response was often made at the expense of authentic Hindu teachings. Vivekananda, along with the other leaders of the neo-Hindu movement, felt it was necessary to both water down the authentic Hinduism of their ancestors, and to adopt such foreign ideas as Radical Universalism, with the hope of gaining the approval of the European masters they found ruling over them.

Vivekananda differed quite significantly from his famous guru in many ways, including in his philosophical outlook, personal style and organizational ambitions. While Ramakrishna led a contemplative life of relative isolation from the larger world, Vivekananda was to become a celebrated figure on the world religion stage. Vivekananda frequently took a somewhat dismissive attitude to traditional Hinduism as it was practiced in his day, arguing (quite incorrectly) that Hinduism was too often irrational, overly mythologically oriented, and too divorced from the more practical need for social welfare work. He was not very interested in Ramakrishna's earlier emphasis on mystical devotion and ecstatic worship. Rather, Vivekananda laid stress on the centrality of his own idiosyncratic and universalistic approach to Vedanta, what later came to be known as 'neo-Vedanta'. Vivekananda differed slightly with Ramakrishna's version of Radical Universalism by attempting to superimpose a distinctly neo-Vedantic outlook to the idea of the unity of all religions. Vivekananda advocated a sort of hierarchical Radical Universalism that espoused the equality of all religions, while simultaneously claiming that all religions are really evolving from inferior notions of religiosity to a pinnacle mode. That pinnacle of all religious thought and practice was, for Vivekananda, of course Hinduism. Though Vivekananda contributed a great deal toward helping European and American non-Hindus to understand the greatness of Hinduism, the Radical Universalist and neo-Hindu inaccuracies that he fostered have also done a great deal of harm as well.

In order to fully experience Hinduism in its most spiritually evocative and philosophically compelling form, we must learn to recognize, and reject, the concocted influences of neo-Hinduism that have permeated the whole of Hindu thought today. It is time to rid ourselves of the liberal Christian inspired 'reformism' that so deeply prejudiced such individuals as Ram Mohan Roy over a century ago. We must free ourselves from the anti-Hindu dogma of Radical Universalism that has so weakened Hinduism, and re-embrace an authentically classical form of Hinduism that is rooted in the actual scriptures of Hinduism, that has been preserved for thousands of years by the various disciplic successions of legitimate acharyas, and that has stood the test of time. We must celebrate traditional Hinduism. The neo-Hindu importation of Radical Universalism may resonate with many on a purely emotional level, but it remains patently anti-Hindu in its origins, an indefensible proposition philosophically, and a highly destructive doctrine to the further development of Hinduism.

Logical Fallacies of Radical Universalism

Radical Universalism is not a doctrine that we find anywhere in traditional Hindu texts, or taught by any of the classical Hindu acharyas. In addition to demonstrating the non-Hindu nature of Radical Universalism from a historical and literary perspective, however, it is also important to examine the validity of the claims of Radical Universalism from an overtly philosophical perspective. We need to see if the idea that 'all religions are the same' even makes any objective

rational sense at all. As we will now see, the dogma of Radical Universalism is riddled throughout with logical inconsistencies, contradictory assertions, ad absurdum implications, and self-defeating conclusions. In the following section of this work, I will examine some of the more absurd philosophical problems that naturally arise from attempting to uphold a Radical Universalist perspective. This will be done via applied philosophical assessment employing both propositional and veridical analysis, as well as original methodological procedures that I have personally developed for philosophical textual analysis.

We're Not Superior...Therefore We're Superior

Looking first at the very statement ‘All religions are the same’ itself, we quickly discover our first problematic instance of circular logic. Let us assume for the sake of argument that Radical Universalism is the consensus opinion among modern Hindus. Modern Hinduism would then be, of course, the only major world religion that upholds this notion of radical equality. As we know, present day (as well as historically instantiated) leaders of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam would all vehemently disagree with this statement that ‘All religions are the same’. These religions all reject any notion of Radical Universalism. Each of these individual major religious traditions is quite vocal in their assertion that their own unique paths, concepts of the Absolute, and soteriological perspectives (theories on the means to achieve spiritual freedom) exclusively reflects their own idiosyncratic traditions. More, they would all assert with equally vociferous force that their own exclusive path holds a clearer insight into Truth, and a surer means for salvation, than does any other faith on earth. Why, after all, would someone even be a member of x religion and not y religion if they did not feel that x religion had something to offer that y religion did not? No other major religion outside of modern neo-Hinduism teaches that ‘all religions are the same’. If Hinduism did actually teach the doctrine of Radical Universalism, modern Hinduism, then, would be the singular instance of a major world religion teaching that ‘all religions are the same’.

The problem that is created is that since only Hinduism is supposedly teaching the ‘truth’ that ‘all religions are the same’, and since no other religion seems to be aware of this ‘truth’ other than modern day Hinduism, then Hinduism is naturally superior to all other religions in its exclusive possession of the knowledge that ‘all religions are the same’. In its attempt to insist that all religions are the same, Radical Universalism has employed a circular pattern of logic that sets itself up as being, astoundingly, superior to all other religions. Thus, attempting to uphold the very claim of Radical Universalism leads to a situation in which Radical Universalism’s very claim is contradicted. A good way to see the inherent circular logic of this claim is to conduct a formal propositional analysis of the argument.

Radical Universalist Fallacy I

1. Modern Hinduism is the only religion that supports Radical Universalism.
2. Radical Universalism states that “All religions are the same.”
3. No other religion states or knows that “All religions are the same.”

4. Since a) no other religions know the truth that 'All religions are the same', and since b) only Hinduism knows the truth that 'All religions are the same', only Hinduism knows the truth of all religions.
5. Only Hinduism knows the truth of all religions.
6. Therefore, Hinduism is both distinct and superior to all religions.
7. Therefore, given Hinduism's distinctness from and superiority to all religions: not all religions are the same.
8. Since all religions are not the same, therefore Radical Universalism is untrue.

It is clear and apparent that the groundless affirmation of Radical Universalism by lesser-informed contemporary neo-Hindu teachers leads to an inescapable spiral of self-defeating logic. In its very attempt to supposedly level the theological playing field by claiming that "all religions are the same", Radical Universalism is automatically compelled to assert its own inherent superiority, and to assign to itself the status of the sole possessor of the 'truth' that all religions are the same, thus negating its original claim in its entirety. In essence, what neo-Hindu apologists of Radical Universalism are saying is: "Since only we possess the knowledge that all religion are equal, then we must be the best." That being the case, of course, all religions are then not equal.

Radical Universalism and Ethical Relativism

A further problem caused by Radical Universalism is that it necessarily leads to ethical relativism. If 'all religions are the same', after all, then by inferential extension all the various ethical systems taught by these different religions must also be the same. To state that they are not is to undermine the very basis of Radical Universalism's claim. Ethical Relativism is a modern, Western philosophical view that claims there are no objective, discernable ethical standards that apply to humanity. There is no transcendent spiritual basis, or even any categorically sufficient rational maxims, for any ethical rules or behavior. Thus, on Ethical Relativism's account, God is not the author of humanity's inborn, inherent sense of right and wrong; and neither can moral standards be discerned through the power of reason. Indeed, Ethical Relativism believes that the existence of any objective moral norms is merely an illusion. There are really no right or wrong actions. There are merely fleetingly subjective rules that apply to a particular individual, at a given time, in a given situation (another name for this modern dogma is thus Situational Ethics). Being an atheistic and materialist doctrine, Ethical Relativism would relegate such religious moral principles as compassion, justice, truthfulness, loving others, and non-violence to the realm of meaninglessness, thus rendering any sense of ethical behavior without ultimate merit or purpose outside of the purely functional value such principles might possess in an immediate and individual given situational instance in time.

When modern neo-Hindus claim that "all religions are the same", this unequivocal statement also necessarily infers that all actions that are done in the name of all religions are similarly equal. After all, if Radical Universalists were to make the assertion that one religion's ethical/ moral beliefs are better or make more sense than another religion's ethical/ moral beliefs, then they are again contradicting their original supposition of the radical equality of all religions. Consequently, what one religion upholds as being morally acceptable must be precisely equal in ethical content and implication to what all other religions uphold as morally acceptable - even if the moral claims of

these various religions directly contradict each other. To state otherwise undermines the underlying premise of Radical Universalism. One religion's acceptable behavioral norms, according to Radical Universalism, are just as legitimate as any other religion's acceptable behavioral norms. Since all religions are equal, then necessarily all religious ethical standards are equal.

While there are arguably some discernable similarities between some ethical rules upheld by some of the world's many religions, we also find that there is also a great deal of dissimilarity. When we do even the most rudimentary comparative analysis of the major world religions' diverse ethical systems, we immediately see that there is some considerable disagreement between them on the question of what is a morally good action versus what is a morally objectionable action. In some religions, for example, it is considered immoral to drink alcohol (Islam, Hinduism, Evangelical Christianity). In other religions, by contrast, alcohol is just fine (Judaism, Catholicism). For some faiths, the killing of animals to eat meat is an ethically prohibited activity (Hinduism, Jainism, much of Buddhism). In others, killing animals is an ethically neutral activity (Islam, Christianity). In some religions it is considered morally legitimate to periodically kill members of another religion merely for being members of a different religion. Historically Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all been culpable in supporting such a view to greater or lesser degrees. For most of the other religions of our world—Hinduism included—on the other hand, to kill someone simply because they practice a different religion from one's own would be considered demonic.

What we find when we comparatively examine the moral teachings of the world's many religions is that, not only is there great diversity of opinion on the question of what constitutes morality, but in fact we often find ethical theories that lie in direct contradiction to each other, and are thus mutually exclusive claims. In order to further understand the problem in attempting to ignore mutually exclusive ethical claims, we will use the following scenario.

Live and Let Die

In the following scenario, we have two individual members of two distinct religious traditions. Person A belongs to a religion that 1) believes it is morally right to worship iconographic images, and 2) it is morally wrong to kill another person merely due to that person's religious belief. Person B, on the other hand, belongs to a religion that states that 1) it is morally wrong to worship iconographic images, and 2) it is morally right to kill another person merely due to that person's religious belief.

Person A, a Hindu priest, is sitting by the banks of the River Ganga. He is offering a puja (worship ceremony) under the warm, embracing rays of the Indian sun. Before him lays his object of adoration: an iconic murti (religious statue) of the Divine Mother. Person A is merely performing a religious duty as prescribed by his religious tradition's beliefs and practices. As he is peacefully offering his puja, person B rides up on horseback and observes the religious actions of person A. For person B's religion, offering worship to any form of iconic religious image is tantamount to sin; it is an abominably terrible act of immorality. Moreover, in person B's religion, person B is morally obligated to end the life of person A for worshipping such an iconic image. Person B proceeds to lop off the head of person A with a sharp sword as person A quietly worships. Person B gets back on his horse and proceeds on his journey happily secure in the knowledge that he performed a positive religious duty in faithful accordance with his religion's moral teachings.

In both the instances of person A and person B, each individual was merely performing his religious duties and following the moral principles specifically ordained by his respective religion. So diametrically opposed to one another were the prescriptions, goals and justifications of these two distinct, religiously inspired moral systems, however, that person A is dead, while person B feels justified before his God for having killed person A. For someone bound by the irrational dictates of Radical Universalism, believing that the paths and moralities of all religions are equal, both actions must be seen as being equally moral.

When the assertion that 'all religions are the same' is made, it is also automatically inferred that the moral systems of all religions are the same as well - even if many of the rules of these moral systems are diametrically opposed to one another. In supporting Radical Universalism, the ethically barren conclusions of Ethical Relativism are also naturally supported. The consequent results are that moral proscriptions and prescriptions that are otherwise contradictory and mutually exclusive are seen as equally valid - a position that cannot be logically asserted. To support Radical Universalism is to say that being violent and being non-violent, to be tolerant and to be intolerant, to have compassion and to have religiously inspired hate are all morally equivalent. The idea that there can be moral equivalency of diametrically opposed moral rules is not upheld by any religion on earth, Hinduism included. The following propositional analytic breakdown will better illustrate the inferential inconsistencies inherent in Radical Universalism from an ethical perspective.

Radical Universalist Fallacy II

1. Radical Universalism claims that "all religions are the same."
2. If 'all religions are the same', then the moral principles of all religions are necessarily also the same.
3. This is so since, if some ethical principles are seen as superior to others, then the religion upholding those superior ethical principles is also superior, thus negating Radical Universalism.
4. We see that the ethical principles of all religions are actually not all the same.
 - 4b. Moreover, we see that some ethical principles upheld by some religions are diametrically opposed to some ethical principles upheld by other religions.
5. To claim that diametrically opposed ethical principles are all valid is to support the moral equivalency theory of Ethical Relativism, which no religion does.
6. Therefore, Radical Universalism necessarily entails Ethical Relativism.
7. Since Ethical Relativism is not valid, Radical Universalism is not valid.
8. Therefore, Radical Universalism is not valid.

Or, alternatively stated in syllogistic logic: RU if and only if ER -ER Therefore -RU

To say that "all religions are the same" is to also claim that "the moral systems of all religions are the same." In turn, to claim that all ethical systems are correct is ultimately to negate all ethical

systems altogether, which is precisely the goal of the philosophical project known as Ethical Relativism.

Relativism Revisited

Radical Universalism leads, via consecutive logical sequence, directly to relativism, both ethical and philosophical. Hinduism, on the other hand, is thoroughly non-relativistic in both its ethical outlook and on the question of what constitutes reality, truth, as well as life's meaning and goal. Classical Hindu acharyas taught that the metaphysical and ontological truths revealed by the Vedic religion (via the epistemic mechanism of shabda-pramana) are necessary truths. Their non-contingency is derived from the fact that they are eternal, trans-material, un-authored and untouched by human fallibility and deceit. Though admittedly some of the acharyas did have some differences in their interpretation of these necessary truths, the revealed truths of the Vedas were clearly recognized by all classical Hindu acharyas as non-relativistic, transcendent truths nonetheless. The divinely inspired content of the Vedic scriptures are not contingent truths, the truth-content of which might be in any way alterable by either subjective opinion or by empirically mediated disputation. If these truths were merely relative and at the mercy of mere subjective opinion, then their value as reliable philosophical and spiritual guides would be severely undermined. Consequently, the unstable, shifting sands of Relativism, in all its varied forms, has been recognized by countless generations of spiritual teachers as being a baseless and imperfect foundation upon which to base one's search for the Absolute and Perfect (God).

Relativism has been recognized by multiple generations of philosophers, both Asian and European, as being a philosophically untenable position the logical implications of which naturally leads to its own self-determined demise. Relativism, in the most general sense of the term, makes the broad sweeping assertion that "There are no absolutes." The difficulty in attempting to prove this indiscriminate contention is that Relativism is incapable of producing such grand axiomatic statements in such a manner that Relativism itself does not violate the logical rigors of its own statements. The moment a Relativist puts forwards the proposition that 'There are no absolutes', the Relativist has just committed the error of herself making just such an absolute statement, which is then itself negated by the proposition that 'There are no absolutes'. Whether speaking in religious, philosophical, aesthetic, metaphysical or ethical terms, Relativism thus neutralizes itself by the self-negating power of its own propositional assertion. As can also be seen in the Relativist dogma of Radical Universalism, Relativism contains within its very own philosophical structure the seeds of its own concomitant refutation.

Hinduism: The Empty Mirror?

A further self-defeating aspect of Radical Universalism is that it severely negates the very need for Hinduism itself, relegating the Hindu tradition to merely being an ideological vehicle subservient to the Radical Universalist agenda, and rendering any meaningful sense of Hindu cultural and religious identity barren. If the Radical Universalists of neo-Hinduism claim that "all religions are the same", then each and every religion is simultaneously deprived of all attributive uniqueness. They are deprived of their identity. This is manifestly true of Hinduism even more so than any other religion, since Radical Universalist neo-Hindus would be the sole representatives of Radical

Universalism on the world religious stage today. If we say that the ancient teachings and profoundly unique spiritual culture of Hinduism is qualitatively no better or no worse than any other religion, then what is the need for Hinduism itself? Hinduism then becomes the blank backdrop, the empty theatrical stage, upon which all other religious ideas are given the unbridled freedom to act, entertain and perform...all at the expense of Hinduism's freedom to assert its own identity. The self-abnegating absurdity of a 'Hindu' Radical Universalism reduces Hinduism itself to a theologically empty shell, a purposeless and amorphous religious entity whose only individual contribution to the realm of religious history is to negate its own existence by upholding the teachings of every other religion on earth, while simultaneously denying its own inherent distinctiveness. Hinduism, subjugated to the Radical Universalist agenda, would find itself reduced to being merely an inert mirror, doomed to aspire to nothing more philosophically substantial than passively reflecting every other religious creed, dogma and practice in its Universalist imposed sheen. This is how the problem breaks down:

Radical Universalist Fallacy III

1. Modern Hinduism is the only religion that purportedly teaches Radical Universalism.
2. Radical Universalism says that "all religions are the same."
3. Since no other religion believes this, they are not obligated to prove Radical Universalism.
4. Since only Hinduism teaches Radical Universalism, only Hinduism is obligated to prove Radical Universalism by its own example.
5. If Hinduism asserts itself as a religion that is in any way distinct and exceptional, then it automatically violates the tenets of Radical Universalism.
6. Therefore, to uphold Radical Universalism, Hinduism must negate its own intrinsic attributive excellences.
7. In negating its own intrinsic attributive excellences, Hinduism negates its own *raison d'etre*, its own reason for existence.
8. Therefore, in upholding Radical Universalism, Hinduism loses its reason for existence.

Radical Universalism leads to the necessary destruction of Hinduism as a comprehensible system of beliefs. Rather than relegating Hinduism to a shadowy imitation of its vibrantly true self, we must reject the enervating influence of Radical Universalism, and re-embrace the authentic teachings of our tradition. Anything less will necessarily lead to Hinduism's inevitable demise.

Revisiting the Mountain Top

I want to return briefly to the inadequately developed, yet habitually employed, metaphor that depicts the diversity of spiritual traditions as being merely different paths ascending the one great mountain of Truth. This is an image that we see repeatedly employed by apologists for Radical Universalism. As a general image of the courage, determination and inner resources necessary to ascend the path to Truth, the climbing of mountains, ladders and stairways is an image that we see employed often, and by a wide variety of religions. When this image is used by the various world religions, however, it is always with the understanding that the summit of the given mountain in

question is representative of the specific idea of the Absolute that the particular religion has in mind. The mountain metaphor has never been used by any religious tradition to express the idea that the summit somehow represents a common goal for all religions, i.e., Radical Universalism. Obviously, since not every religion shares the same metaphysical, theological or ontological conception about the ultimate nature of the Absolute, not every religion is trying to climb to the top of the same theological mountain.

There are several radically distinct, and wholly irreconcilable, religiously inspired ideas about what constitutes the Absolute. Consequently, rather than attempting to artificially claim that there is only one mountain top toward which all religions aspire, it would be more truthful, and more in keeping with what the various religious traditions themselves actually say, to state that there are several different mountains - each representing a radically different idea of what is the Absolute. There is a Nirvana mountain, a Brahman mountain, an Allah mountain, a Jain mountain. Some mountains are monotheistic, some are polytheistic, henotheistic, pantheistic or panentheistic. Moreover, it is incumbent upon us all individually to choose for ourselves which of these many possibly correct Absolute-mountains we wish to scale. Only one of these mutually exclusive philosophical mountains, however, can be the correct one.

Three important factors that differentiate the nature of various religions are a) The Problem: an analysis of the fundamental existential dilemma that human beings face, b) The Solution: the proposed escape from our existential problem, c) The Absolute: the nature of the ultimate Reality. Different religions are clearly aiming at different, most often mutually exclusive, soteriological and theological goals. For the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the human person is seen as a sinner who is in need of repentance, divine forgiveness and renewal. The Absolute for these allied traditions is an omnicompetent, anthropomorphically envisioned, monotheistic Godhead. For Buddhism, it is taught that the human person is unnecessarily experiencing suffering due to mistakenly perceiving herself as an enduring, self-conscious entity. Liberation, in Buddhism, begins with the realization that there is no eternal self (no soul), but only momentary states that give the illusion of a permanent person. The final extinction of the human person in the form of nirvana (literally “blowing out”) is thus the goal. The Absolute is correlated with *Shunya*, the void, emptiness. For Buddhism, there is no God, no soul, nor any other permanent metaphysical reality. For Hinduism, the human existential dilemma is caused by ignorance (*avidya*) of our true state as permanent spiritual beings (*atman*), and our illusion (*maya*) of separation from the Absolute. Liberation (*moksha*) is achieved by transcending this illusion, and by realizing our inherent union (*yoga*) with the Absolute. Speaking in the most general of terms, the Absolute in Hinduism is termed Brahman. Brahman is an omnicompetent, non-anthropomorphic panentheistic Godhead. For Jainism, the human dilemma is caused by our mistaken notion that we are dependent, temporary beings with limited knowledge. Liberation (*kevala*) is achieved when we realize our true nature as independent, eternal and omniscient beings. For Jainism, there is no God, but rather independently existing liberated persons are the Absolute. As we can see with these four radically different approaches to the three fundamental issues of a) the Problem, b) the Solution, c) the Absolute, there are many conflicting and irreconcilable contradictions between them. Each of these traditions holds a very different account about what constitutes our true spiritual nature; each has its own distinctive idea of what it means to realize our true nature; and each has a uniquely divergent idea of what is the ultimate nature of the Absolute.

I have chosen these four broad religious traditions (Abrahamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain) to illustrate the point that, not only are there different religions, but there are also different categorical types of religion. There are different religious systems such that the very philosophical premises and conclusions that they each uphold are divergently dissimilar and directly contradict one another. The Abrahamic religions, consisting of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we can term Anthropomorphic Monotheism. Buddhism we can call Non-theistic. Hinduism can be understood as Panentheistic. Jainism is Anthropotheistic.

These four categorically different types of religion are wholly irreconcilable, i.e., if the claims of one is true, then the claims of the other three are necessarily false. Religion A is a categorically different type of religion from Religion B if what must exist if Religion A's problem, solution and Absolute are correct cannot simultaneously co-exist with what must exist if Religion B's problem, solution and Absolute are correct, and visa versa. Given the mutually exclusive assertions that each of these four categorical types of religion uphold about: a) the analysis of the human existential dilemma, b) the means to human freedom, and c) the ultimate goal to be realized, the overarching feature of all these four distinct types of religion is that, if the philosophical content of any one type is true, then the philosophical content of the other three are clearly not. It is as logically impossible to hold that these religions are all true, or even that any two of these religions are simultaneously true, as it is to say that there is such a thing as a round square, or a married bachelor. Such a nonsensically contradictory proposition can perhaps be verbally spoken, but not rationally thought.

Brahman: The Absolute of the Vedas

Let us look now at what Hinduism, specifically, holds to be the Absolute. The ultimate goal and Absolute of Hinduism is termed Brahman in Sanskrit. The word comes from the Sanskrit verb root brh, meaning 'to grow'. Etymologically, the term means 'that which grows' (*brhati*) and 'which causes to grow' (*brhmayati*). Brahman, as understood by the scriptures of Hinduism, as well as by the acharyas of the Vedanta school, is a very specific conception of the Absolute. This unique conception has not been replicated by any other religion on earth, and is exclusive to Hinduism. Thus to even call this conception of Brahman 'God' is, in a sense, somewhat imprecise. This is the case because Brahman does not refer to the anthropomorphic concept of God of the Abrahamic religions. When we speak of Brahman, we are referring neither to the 'old man in the sky' concept, nor to the idea of the Absolute as even capable of being vengeful, fearful or engaging in choosing a favorite people from among His creatures. For that matter, Brahman is not a 'He' at all, but rather transcends all empirically discernable categories, limitations and dualities.

In the Taittiriya Upanishad II.1, Brahman is described in the following manner: *satyam jnanam anantam brahma*, "Brahman is of the nature of truth, knowledge and infinity." Infinite positive qualities and states have their existence secured solely by virtue of Brahman's very reality. Brahman is a necessary reality, eternal (i.e., beyond the purview of temporality), fully independent, non-contingent, and the source and ground of all things. Brahman is both immanently present in the realm of materiality, interpenetrating the whole of reality as the sustaining essence that gives it structure, meaning and existential being, yet Brahman is simultaneously the transcendent origin of all things (thus, panentheistic). As the primary causal substance of material reality (*jagatkarana*), Brahman does not arbitrarily will the coming into being of the non-Brahman metaphysical principles of matter and jivas (individuated consciousness), but rather they are

manifest into being as a natural result of the overflowing of Brahman's grandeur, beauty, bliss and love. Brahman cannot but create abundant good in a similar manner to how Brahman cannot but exist. Both existence and overflowing abundance are as much necessary properties of Brahman as love and nurturing are necessary qualities of any virtuous and loving mother. One can say that Brahman Itself (Him/Herself) constitutes the essential building material of all reality, being the antecedent primeval ontological substance from whence all things proceed. There is no *ex nihilo* creation in Hinduism. Brahman does not create from nothing, but from the reality of Its own being. Thus Brahman is, in Aristotelian terms, both the Material Cause as well as the Efficient Cause of creation. As the source of Dharma, the metaphysical ordering principles inherent in the design of the cosmos, Brahman can be viewed as the Formal Cause. And as the final goal of all reality, Brahman is also the Final Cause. Being the ontological source of all reality, Brahman is the only substantial real that truly exists, all other metaphysical categories being either a) contingent transformations of Brahman, having their very being subsisting in attributive dependence upon Brahman, or else b) illusory in nature. These views about the nature of Brahman are in general keeping with the theological teachings of both the Advaita and the Vishishta-Advaita schools of Hinduism.

All reality has its source in Brahman. All reality has its grounding sustenance in Brahman. It is in Brahman that all reality has its ultimate repose. Hinduism, specifically, is consciously and exclusively aiming toward this reality termed Brahman. Not all religions are aiming at the Hindu concept of Brahman as outlined above. It is crucial for us to have first comprehensively grasped the full ontological implications of the Hindu concept of Brahman in order to clearly understand the fallacious premise of Radical Universalism.

Brahman and Free Volition

The primary reason why Radical Universalists claim that “all religions are the same” is due to the pretentious assumption that the various individual Absolutes toward which each religion aims is, unbeknownst to them all, really the same conceptual goal. In other words, the members of all other religions are also really seeking Brahman...they are just not intelligent enough to know it! As every religion will vociferously affirm, however, they are not seeking Brahman. Brahman is not Allah; Allah is not Nirvana; Nirvana is not Kevala; Kevala is not polytheistic gods/goddesses; polytheistic gods/goddesses is not Yahweh; Yahweh is not the Ancestors; the Ancestors are not tree spirits, tree spirits are not Brahman. When a religious Muslim tells us that he is worshipping Allah, and not Brahman, we need to take him seriously and respect his choice. When a Buddhist tells us that they want to achieve Nirvana, and not Brahman, we need to take his claim seriously and respect his decision; and so on. To disrespectfully insist that all other religions are really just worshipping Brahman without knowing it, and to do so in the very name of respect and tolerance, is the very height of hypocrisy and intolerance. The uncomplicated fact is that, regardless of how sincerely we may wish that all religions desired the same Absolute that we Hindus wish to achieve, other religions simply do not. They, and we, are attempting to climb categorically different mountains. We need to accept and live with this concrete theological fact.

Distinguishing Salvific States

The Christian's sole aim in salvation is to be raised physically from the dead on the eschatological day of judgment, and to find herself with Jesus in heaven, who is to be found seated at the right hand of the anthropomorphic male Father/God of the Old and New Testament. Muslims aspire toward a delightfully earthy paradise in which 72 *houris*, or virgin youth, will be granted to them to enjoy (Qur'an, 76:19). Jains are seeking *kevala*, or 'aloneness', in which they will enjoy an eternal existence of omniscience and omnipotence without the unwanted intrusion of a God, a Brahman or an Allah. Buddhists seek to have all the transitory elements that produce the illusion of a self melt away, and to have themselves in turn melt away into the nihilism of *nirvana*. To the Buddhist, Brahman also is an illusion. Each of these different types of religion has its own categorically unique concept of salvation and of the Absolute toward which they aspire. Each concept is irreconcilable with the others. To state the situation unequivocally, if a Christian, Muslim, Jain or Buddhist, upon achieving their distinct notion of salvation, were to find themselves instead united with Brahman, they would most likely be quite upset and confused indeed. And they would have a right to be! Conversely, the average yogi probably would be quite bewildered upon finding 72 virgins waiting for him upon achieving *moksha*, rather than realizing the eternal bliss of Brahman. One person's vision of salvation is another person's idea of hell.

My God is Bigger Than Your God

What is especially troubling about the sentimentally driven assertion of Radical Universalism that "all religions are the same" is the fact that, in its purported attempt to foster tolerance and the unity of all religions, Radical Universalism itself leads directly to intolerance and dogmatism. The overriding concern that any religious person must address is:

If Radical Universalism is true, then who chooses which concept of the Absolute is the one toward which all religions supposedly aspire? Let us explore now precisely how Radical Universalism leads to a situation of intolerance. We have shown that there are several, categorically distinct and mutually exclusive, concepts about what constitutes the nature of the Absolute. From the perspectives of reason, logic, theological consistency, and common sense, only one of these concepts about the Absolute can be true. This is the case because with any either/ or proposition, any one claim automatically entails the negation of any other contradictory and opposing claim. Repeating this example, if *x* is either a square or a circle, it must be one or the other. It cannot be a round square! Similarly, the Absolute either has meaningful existence or it does not exist; the Absolute is either an anthropomorphic entity or it is not; the Absolute is either singular or else it is plural; etc. For any one mutually exclusive concept of the Absolute to be true, the other mutually exclusive concepts are necessarily false. To assert otherwise is to reduce the Absolute to the level of absurdity. By definition the very term 'Absolute' means the topmost, greatest and maximally superlative of all. To claim that there can be more than one 'Absolute' is as nonsensical as claiming that there are more than one 'best', 'greatest', or 'most important' in any given category. It is the very grammatical nature of the superlative that there can only be one *x* superlative. Thus, for Radical Universalism to be true, only one concept of the 'Absolutes' outlined above can be upheld. To state otherwise is to claim that there are multiple Absolutes. Which in turn means that there is no one Absolute.

Having thus arbitrarily chosen one concept of the Absolute, i.e., Brahman, Radical Universalists have then made the subsequent claim that this one concept is the only concept of the Absolute that all religions are aiming at, whether the followers of these diverse religions are themselves aware of this or not. This, in fact, is precisely the claim that neo-Hindus who support the non-Hindu idea of Radical Universalism make. For non-traditional Hindus who assert Radical Universalism, the arbitrary choice for the one Absolute that all religions must be aiming toward - whether they know and agree with this or not—is Brahman. In so doing, however, Radical Universalists are intolerantly imposing Brahman upon all other non-Hindu religions as their real goal. And they are making this involuntary imposition in the name of tolerance!

Radical Universalism: an Intolerant Tolerance

Radical Universalism, as expressed by modern, non-traditional Hindus, would seek to deny members of other religions the right to assert their own religions as unique and distinct traditions. Radical Universalism would seek to deny non-Radical Universalists the right to believe in an Absolute that is categorically not Brahman. Regardless of how radically different the goal of any other religion might be, whether that goal is Nirvana, Allah, or any other, followers of other religions are told that they are all really aiming at the decidedly Hindu goal of Brahman whether they know this or not, and whether they want Brahman or not. By extension, in its attempt to falsely conceal the concrete fact of a plurality of religions, Radical Universalism would deny any non-Radical Universalist religion the very basis of their existence. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and members of other religions insist that they are not following the doctrines of Hinduism, that they are not worshipping the Absolute of Hinduism and that they are consequently not Hindus. By forcing them to accept Radical Universalism, they are being told that they have no choice but to adhere to the ‘one true faith’ that Radical Universalism upholds. That one true faith is non-traditional, Radical Universalist neo-Hinduism.

To insist on the complete equality of all religions is to deny their inherent differences. To deny the inherent differences of varied religions is to deny them the freedom to have their own beliefs, rituals, goals, and ways of viewing the world. One of the most important aspects of the right to freedom of speech is the right to be able to disagree. In imposing one path, one God and one world-view on all the diverse religions of the world, Radical Universalism denies these religions, and the followers of these religions, their dignity and uniqueness. Radical Universalism ultimately denies the uniqueness of individual persons and their ability to hold divergent - and even contradictory - philosophical and theological opinions. It denies us our freedom to respectfully disagree. Fascinatingly, and sadly, in its attempt to force tolerance and equality, Radical Universalism enforces bigotry and an inferior status against any who would dare to disagree with the philosophical mountain of Radical Universalism.

Radical Universalist Fallacy IV

1. Radical Universalism proposes that “all religions are the same.”
2. All religions are not the same, but are actually very diverse in opinion, structure, history, values, philosophy, soteriology, ontology, etc.

3. Radical Universalism is true if and only if all religions are the same.
4. For Radical Universalism to be true, all religious diversity must be denied.
5. Therefore, Radical Universalism denies all religious diversity.

One God/Many Names

Proponents of Radical Universalism have frequently attempted to uphold the dogma that ‘all religions are the same’ by appealing to one of the most misunderstood mantras in the history of modern Hinduism. In the Rig Veda there is a famous verse (I.164.46) that states: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, “God is one, despite sages calling it by various names”. For several generations, a variety of neo-Hindu leaders and practitioners have misquoted this verse *ad nauseam* in an attempt to prop up the dogma of Radical Universalism with a seeming reference to the Hindu scriptures. Radical Universalists would maintain that this verse is directly pointing to the notion that the ultimate aim of all religions is one and the same, despite the fact that these different religions might call this one supreme truth by many different denominational or linguistically dictated names. “Whether you call it God, Nirvana, Allah, Brahman, Goddess, Ancestors, Spirits, Elves, Ghosts or anything else, you’re really only indicating the one supreme truth” is the commonly parroted refrain of Radical Universalists. Though on an initial glance, this verse of Vedic scripture might appear to be indicating a Radical Universalist viewpoint, when more rigorously analyzed in its proper philosophical and grammatical context, it is clearly saying something entirely different from what modern Radical Universalists contend.

Categorical Exegetical Analysis

In order to fully appreciate the proper purport of the Vedic verse *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, (the Truth is One the wise speak of variously) we need to understand the verse in terms of its own inherently derived meaning, and not merely in accordance with polemically determined speculative opinion. We can do this by explicating the verse in accordance with the verse’s precise categorical status, followed by an accurate veridical assessment of its philosophical content. In order to more precisely understand the philosophical meaning of the many verses found in the Hindu scriptures, this verse included, I have developed a methodological system of explication that I call ‘Categorical Exegetical Analysis’. This interpretive methodology enables its user to more accurately understand the precise meaning of any singular unit of philosophical text from the Hindu scriptures, units ranging from a simple declarative statement to a string of verses to an entire work, and held together by one unitive philosophical or conceptual motif.

Stated briefly, this philo-exegetical method involves three sequential steps. First, we must determine whether the verse in question is making an actual philosophical statement or some other form of statement (poetic, descriptive, historical, narrative, etc.). In the case of the verse *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, the philosophically propositional makeup of the statement, the obviously philosophical nature of the subject (*sat*, ‘Truth/God’), and the clearly unitive conceptual pattern of the verse, undoubtedly makes this a philosophical statement. Second, we need to see what category of philosophical subject matter the statement falls under by determining the precise philosophical nature of the textual unit under analysis. Is the verse saying something about ethics, about knowledge, about liberation, or about some other aspect of philosophy?

The following are the various categories of philosophical statements that the verse under analysis could potentially fall under.

- a) Ontological—statements outlining the nature of the Absolute.
- b) Ethical—statements concerning proper/improper behavior.
- c) Soteriological—statements about the means and/or nature of liberation.
- d) Social—political, economic and sociological statements.
- e) Aesthetic—poetic description and/or theory.
- f) Cosmological—statements on the nature of the universe and physics.
- g) Cosmogonical—statements about the origin/creation of the universe.
- h) Epistemological—statements concerning means of knowing.

Every propositional statement containing significant philosophical content found in the scriptures of Hinduism falls within one or more of these philosophical categories. It is impossible to determine the full scope of the intent of any statement without first discerning which category a statement falls under. This is so because of the commonsensical fact that before we can determine what a verse is saying philosophically, we first need to know what aspect of philosophy the verse is addressing. Third, after completing steps one and two, a proper philosophical explication of the verse can be done.

We will now use Categorical Exegetical Analysis to examine the famous verse from the Rig Veda: *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*. An exact transliteration of the verse is:

“Truth/ God (sad) [is] One (ekam), [despite] seers (vipra) call (vadanti) [it] variously (bahudha).”

The typical Radical Universalist attempt at interpreting this verse is to view it, incorrectly, as either an epistemological or a soteriological claim. That is, this verse is usually misinterpreted as either saying that a) God can be known in a myriad of ways (thus seeing this as an epistemological statement), or that b) there are many ways or paths of achieving God (thus misinterpreting this as a soteriological verse).

It is my contention that both interpretations are incorrect. An interpretive error is committed by Radical Universalists due to not understanding the proper categorical context, and thus the proper philosophical meaning, of the statement. The mantra *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* is neither an epistemological nor a soteriological statement; but it is rather an ontological one. It is not talking about the proper derivation of authoritative knowledge (*pramana*), nor about the means of attaining liberation (*mokshopaya*, or *mokshamarga*). Rather, the verse is making a clear attributive statement about the essential ontological nature of the Absolute. The ontological nature of this verse is clearly known due to the fact that *sat* ('Truth, reality, being, God') is the singular nominative subject, which is then qualified by the accusative *ekam* ('one, unity'). 'God is One...' Thus the primary clausal emphasis of this propositional verse is clearly placed upon explaining the ontological nature of *sat* (before consonant-initial endings, the *t* becomes *d*; thus *sat* becomes *sad* in this verse) being a metaphysically unified substance (*ekam* = 'one'). The emphasis is not on the secondary supportive clause *vipra bahudha vadanti*. The point of this verse

is the ontological unity and integrity of the Absolute, that God is one...despite the fact that this Absolute may have multiple names. The statement *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* is an ontological statement with God as subject, not an epistemological statement with wise-ones as subjects, or a soteriological statement with the means of liberation as the subject. Indeed, multiple paths of liberation are not even mentioned in the original Sanskrit of this verse at all, leaving even less reason for anyone to misinterpret this as a verse somehow supporting Radical Universalism from a soteriological perspective. In summation, this verse is not talking about multiple paths for achieving liberation (since it does not even mention 'paths'). It is not talking about the various means of knowing God. Rather, it is a straightforward ontological statement commenting upon the unitive nature of the Absolute, that God is one. Thus, 'God is one, despite sages calling it by various names.'

Radical Universalism and Vedic Epistemology

For traditional Hinduism, unsubstantiated claims to truth, such as Radical Universalism, are not merely to be taken at face value. Such claims always need to be critically evaluated in order to determine the verity of such declarations. Followers of Hinduism derive their knowledge of Truth from, as well as live their lives in accordance with, the divine knowledge revealed in the form of the Veda. For knowledgeable and traditional followers of Hinduism, such concerns as personal ethical decisions, philosophical judgments and the efficacy of spiritual practices (*sadhana*) must be in accord with three specific epistemological criteria. These three are: —

- 1) **Shastra:** The divine scriptural guidance of Hinduism (including the Vedas, Upanisads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, etc.);
- 2) **Acharya:** Authentic spiritual preceptors who teach the truths of Hinduism with uncompromising honesty, in accord with an authentic Vedic understanding, and who wholly personify what they teach. Such authentic spiritual preceptors in the past have included such truly great acharyas as Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva;
- 3) **Viveka:** One's own inherent capacity for intelligent discernment of truth versus untruth, reality versus illusion.

It is only by deriving knowledge of metaphysical, religious and philosophical questions in accordance with these three epistemic mechanisms that we avoid being cheated by either our own internal tendencies toward self-delusion, or by externally sourced false dogmas. It is with unequivocal certainty that, when objectively judged by all three of these traditionally accepted validating criteria, the pronouncements of Radical Universalism cannot be upheld as either logically valid or philosophically true. Radical Universalism, then, in accordance with the above three Vedic criteria for ascertaining the validity of any truth-claim, is to be judged a false dogma.

Radical Universalism, Christian Missionaries and the RSS

Despite the utter irrationality of the Radical Universalist doctrine, and the fact that Radical Universalism is completely alien to Hindu philosophy, no other dogma has been as perniciously clung onto in modern Hinduism. In the following section, we will examine the relationship of the

important and influential Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) movement to Radical Universalism. The RSS has been a movement dedicated to the social and cultural renewal of the national ideal of Bharata. Despite many glaring flaws in its neo-Hindu derived philosophy and program, the RSS has done much positive work to benefit India in the many decades since its founding. As a neo-Hindu inspired Indian nationalist movement, the RSS movement has had an uneasy relationship with Radical Universalism since the RSS's very initial stages of development. On the one hand, the RSS has strived for decades, and in the face of often intense opposition, to create a greater sense of Hindu identity and pride among Indian Hindus. Yet on the other hand, most of the RSS's top leaders throughout the 20th century, and now extending into the 21st, have been ardent supporters of the non-Hindu idea that 'all religions are the same'. In numerous private discussions that I have had with many RSS leaders over the years, these leaders would often confidentially admit to me the self-defeating nature of Radical Universalism, stating that the doctrine was upheld only for strategic political reasons. The doctrine is being upheld by the RSS despite the fact that this destructive idea has done more harm to Hinduism than any other idea in the history of Hinduism. Despite their acknowledgement of Radical Universalism's many destructive flaws, top leaders of the RSS have, remarkably, held on to this dogma with greater tenacity than most, and to the utter detriment of Hinduism's longer-term interests.

It has always been a poignant source of despondency on the part of many traditionalist Hindus that, on the one hand, many leaders of the RSS inspired Sangh Parivar will periodically attempt to defend Radical Universalistic notions in order to opportunistically showcase the liberality and universality of Hinduism. But on the other hand, these very same leaders will simultaneously denounce Christian missionaries for converting people from one particular 'True Path' (Hinduism) of Radical Universalism to another particular 'True Path' (Christianity) of Radical Universalism. With these and similar attempts at reconciling two mutually opposing programs, such shortsighted neo-Hindu leaders attempt to have it both ways on the question of whether or not all religions are really just the same. Radical Universalism is politically expedient in that it supposedly showcases Hinduism's liberality; but it is also privately acknowledged as a subversive idea that harms Hinduism to its essential core. The RSS leaders' answer to this dilemma is to create philosophical round squares by simultaneously affirming both contradictory claims. We are told that Christianity is just as legitimate a path as Hinduism, while simultaneously being told that we cannot allow any Hindus to convert to this 'alien faith'. Aggressive and unethical missionary activities in India is a legitimate issue that needs to be addressed. Holding to such a contradictory position, however, is not the most effective way to stem the tide of unethical conversions in India.

The glaring inconsistencies inherent in such an untenable position reveal even more dramatically both the contradictory nature of Radical Universalism, as well as the damaging effects that this unsound dogma has had on our leaders' ability to discern authentic Hindu teachings from absurdities espoused in the name of Hinduism. With such intellectually lethargic leaders as these, is it any real wonder why the average Hindu remains bewildered about what Hinduism actually teaches, and that intellectually inquisitive Hindu youth find themselves so easily lured to other, seemingly more rational, faiths? The gratuitous irrationality of Radical Universalism has led to widespread theological bewilderment on the part of ill-trained Hindu leaders, the common Hindu parent, and intellectually dynamic Hindu youth. If Radical Universalism is true, then in opposing Christian missionaries the RSS is only opposing another legitimate path toward the summit of the one sole mountain of truth. If Radical Universalism is false and non-Hindu, then the RSS will have

to renounce Radical Universalism, and renew and reassert itself with dynamic vigor as the defender of authentic and traditional Vedic Dharma against the aggressive missionary activities of all non-Hindu religions. If such philosophical clarity were to guide our present Hindu leadership, coupled with the Hindu masses finally taking pride in a religion that begins to actually make sense, the very real threat of Christian and Islamic missionary aggressiveness would quickly fade away in the face of a resurgent pride in Hindu Dharma.

Radical Universalism weakens the Hindu spirit. Vedic Dharma fortifies it. If the RSS and the Sangh Parivar are ever going to be taken seriously by the Hindu masses as a movement of vision, courage and legitimate Hindu renewal, the RSS has to decide whether or not the time has finally arrived for Radical Universalism to be firmly denounced and abandoned. Moreover, the RSS needs to realistically assess the damaging effects of neo-Hinduism in its own development, as well as in its effects on the greater Hindu community, and realign itself as a defender of traditionalist Hindu Dharma. The immense implications of this intra-Hindu debate for the preservation of Dharma and for securing a meaningful future for Hindu youth cannot be overestimated. We must preserve Vedic culture and secure a future for Hindu children. It is time for our Hindu leaders to lead.

Beacons of Hope

Fortunately, by no means have all present-day Hindu leaders allowed themselves to thoughtlessly succumb to the mind-numbing influence of Radical Universalism. Indeed, in the present generation we have been blessed with the sagacious guidance of many truly authentic traditionalist Hindu gurus and teachers. These gurus, many of whom represent some of the most ancient lineages (sampradayas) of classical Hinduism, have spoken out compellingly and courageously against both Radical Universalism and the neo-Hinduism from which it took birth, and have articulated the urgent need for the restoration of genuine and traditional Hinduism. Among the many Hindu leaders in recent decades who have openly repudiated Radical Universalism and neo-Hinduism can be included: Swami Chinmayananda, Pujya Swami Dayananda Sarasvati, Shivaya Subramuniya Swami, Srila Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Sri Vamadeva Shastri, Sri Chinna Jeeyar Swami, and Sri Rangapriya Swami, among many others. We need to help facilitate the work of such truly genuine Dharma leaders if we wish to witness the renewal of authentic Hinduism.

Reclaiming the Jewel of Dharma

Sanatana Dharma, authentic Hinduism, is a religion that is just as unique, valuable and integral a religion as any other major religion on earth, with its own beliefs, traditions, advanced system of ethics, meaningful rituals, philosophy and theology. The religious tradition of Hinduism is solely responsible for the original creation of such concepts and practices as Yoga, Ayurveda, Vastu, Jyotisha, Yajna, Puja, Tantra, Vedanta, Karma, etc. These and countless other Vedic-inspired elements of Hinduism belong to Hinduism, and to Hinduism alone. Though they are elements of Hinduism alone, however, they are also simultaneously Hinduism's divine gift to a suffering world. Thus, so many of the essential elements of Hinduism are now to be found incorporated into the structures and beliefs of many of the world's diverse religious traditions. The world, both ancient and modern, has appreciated, either with direct acknowledgement or not, the greatness of Hindu ideals. When we make the sentimentally comforting, yet unthinking, claim that "all religions are

the same”, we are unwittingly betraying the grandeur and integrity of this ancient heritage, and contributing to weakening the philosophical/cultural matrix of Hinduism to its very core.

Each and every time a Hindu upholds Radical Universalism, and bombastically proclaims that “all religions are the same”, she does so at the dire expense of the very Hinduism she claims to love. To deny the uniqueness and greatness of Hinduism leads, in turn, to a very unhealthy psychological state of self-loathing, a sense of unworthiness and a schizophrenic confusion on the part of anyone who wishes to consider themselves Hindu. This is especially the case for Hindu youth. The effects of this debilitating inferiority complex, coupled with the lack of philosophical clarification, that result from the denigrating influence of Radical Universalism are the principal reasons why Hindu parents find their children all too often lacking a deep interest in Hinduism and, in some cases, even abandoning Hinduism for seemingly more rational and less self-abnegating religions. Who, after all, wants to follow a religion in which it is claimed that the very basis of the religion is to exult the greatness of other religions at its own expense? The answer is: no one.

If we want to ensure that our youth remain committed to Hinduism as a meaningful path, that our leaders teach Hinduism in a manner that represents the tradition authentically and with dignity, and that the greater Hindu community can feel that they have a religion that they can truly take pride in, then we must abandon Radical Universalism. If we want Hinduism to survive so that it may continue to bring hope, meaning and enlightenment to untold future generations, then the next time our son or daughter asks us what Hinduism is really all about, let us not slavishly repeat to them that “all religions are the same”. Let us instead look them in their eyes, and teach them the uniquely precious, the beautifully endearing, and the philosophically profound truths of our tradition...truths that have been responsible for keeping Hinduism a vibrantly living religious force for over 5000 years. Let us teach them Sanatana Dharma, the eternal way of Truth.

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